



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

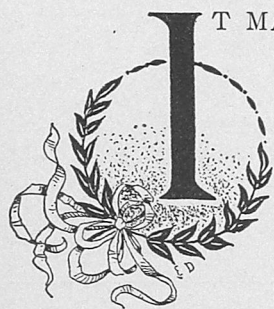
We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE DECORATORS OF TWENTY YEARS AGO.

BY B. A. RONZONE.



IT MAY be said that every generation creates a decorative art-world of its own, which reflects, in a more or less degree, the characteristics of the people who make its existence possible.

In other words, the fads and idiosyncracies that prevail at certain periods of time, are only the temporary weaknesses, —so to speak,—of the age, presented by the decorators in such

shape as may better please the fancies of their patrons.

To the careful reader of the history of decorating it will appear very obvious that decorative art worlds have been made up, at all times, of pretty much the same human elements.

The elements that made up the "art-world" of the time of which we are about to treat, however, differed from the others beyond any comparison as far as volume is concerned.

The enormous fortunes made during the war and immediately after it, had given to a great portion of our population the means to enable them to embellish their homes, and money was lavished in that direction, with an unheard of generosity.

Ten years were not sufficient to cool what may be termed a burst of decorative impulse; and it may be safely asserted that no city in the world, ever saw such a vast number of buildings—public as well as private—decorated in so many years as did our metropolis. Hence as might be expected, the art-world swelled to an enormous size.

But let us see what the elements mentioned were. Firstly, a limited number of decorative artists; secondly, a multitude of mechanical painters; and thirdly a number of individuals to whom it would be difficult to give an appropriate name in the realm of art, for the reason that they were neither artists nor artisans, but simply adventurers.

It will not be out of place to define the above terms from the writer's point of view. The decorative artists—those worthy of the name—were sincere men, full of honesty of purpose, who were entirely devoted to the unlimited study of the ideal.

They were for the most part unpretentious and industrious men, whose freedom from the craving of morbid acquisitiveness caused them, not unfrequently, to lose sight of their pecuniary interests in the meditation of rainbow hues; not that they failed to recognize the full value of money—it was simply this; they made it subservient to their love of art.

Their sole aim in life was to excel in beautifying surfaces, and to make the conditions of what they touched better than that in which they found it.

Fully recognizing the fact that decorative art is based on common sense, they knew that their work, in order to be what it should, must express its utility, propriety and purity in no uncertain manner.

They could create compositions and execute them too; and their greatest pride was to make them as original as nature would permit them.

True they made use of the works of other minds to develop their own, but they scorned to plagiarize other people's ideas, in whole or in part, and present them to the public as the inventions or inspirations of their own brains.

The mechanical painters, generally speaking, were devoid of artistic originality; if they had any gift of invention, it consisted in massing, in all conceivable combinations the details which art manufacturers placed upon the market, in no stinted quantities, (principally for the former's trade,) without any regard for order, purity, purpose or fitness.

In many cases these painters were industrious and honest men, so that if they frequently succeeded in inducing generous people to the extent of permitting them (the painters) to desecrate the ceilings and walls of their homes, it was only through their ignorance of the mission of decorative art.

They had no other object in view than that of making as much money as possible, out of what they sincerely believed to be simply a calling meant for no other purpose.

Hence they did not hesitate when the occasion presented itself to cover rare decorations of artistic beauty with their meaningless work.

Novelty, no matter how incongruous or debasing, no matter how glaringly out of place and harlequinistic in its effects, was their ideal and to that they bent all their energies.

These adventurers, were men to whom nature had given above all their other qualifications the gift of tongue; they were crafty and quick to turn to their advantage whatever came in their way, in what they considered, a thoroughly business manner.

They were for the most part men of good presence, and in possession of a remarkable store of technical terms, which, to people who knew little or nothing of art matters, had the sound of deep knowledge.

But there were some who were remarkably ignorant of the art in which they dabbled, and their success, was due chiefly to their marvelous nerve.

The prime if not the sole object of these men, generally speaking, was simply to use art and artist to secure their own selfish ends, and they frequently succeeded, in so placing themselves between the artist and patron, that they could easily and in safety, cheat the one, and deceive the other.

In this manner, however, they were instrumental at times in producing creditable work, because they could make use of the hands and brains of excellent, but needy artists, who were willing to work in silence; or rather in the shade, lured on by golden promises, which they were destined never to see fulfilled.

But as a general thing they sub-contracted their work to the lowest bidders, without looking too deeply into their efficiency as painters; and either through ignorance or cupidity they imposed the most incompetent of artisans upon their patrons, as models of artistic excellence. Thus very frequently, the most spurious of work, was made to pass, provided it yielded the employer handsome returns.

Such were the conditions that confronted the artists who form the subject of our sketch; and when we add that most of them were college graduates, and all of them graduates of art schools or studios; that most of them had traveled extensively in both hemispheres; that they all spoke several languages, and that good music, and the best books of ancient and modern authors, were the recreations they generally indulged in, it must appear to the average reader, that said conditions were in no way suited to inspire them with that kind of courage that leads to sublime effort.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

